

HUMOR: NOT JUST A LAUGHING MATTER!



Class 2

Susan Flewelling Goran

CLASS 2 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Describe how early philosophers perceived feelings regarding laughter led to the superiority theory.
- Provide an example of humor as described in the incongruity theory.
- Discuss which theory of humor best describes your beliefs



Is there a common ingredient
for all humor?

SEARCH FOR THE ESSENCE

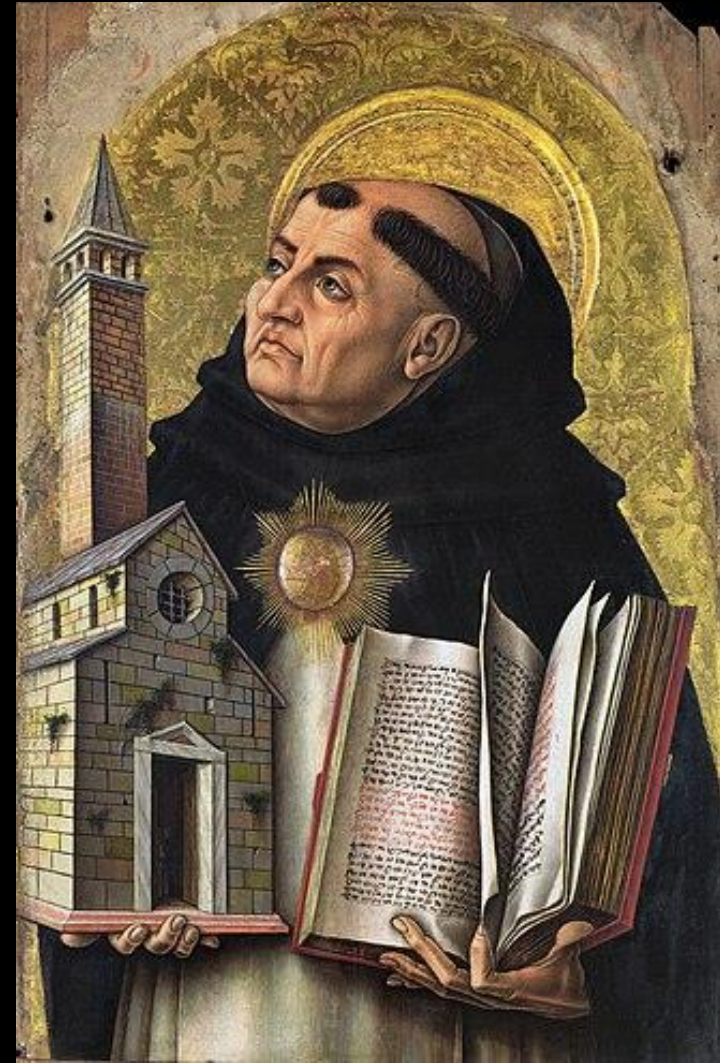
- **Philosophers:** Little was said: the most that any notable philosopher wrote about laughter or humor was an essay (less known philosophers Frances Hutcheson and James Beattie)
 - Word *humor* was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18th century; traditional discussions were about laughter or comedy (Plato, Hobbes, and Kant)
 - Henri Bergson's 1900 *Laughter* was the first book by a notable philosopher on humor. (<https://philosophicalscraps.wordpress.com/2020/05/21/a-response-to-bergsons-laughter-pt-1/>)
 - He claims that only humans laugh, and that when we laugh, we laugh at other humans or things that in some way remind us of humans
 - "Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter." "To feel strongly about something is to take it "seriously;" to laugh at something or someone is to step away emotionally and find the comic"
 - Preliminary observation is that while the comic is a realm of intelligence rather than emotion, "This intelligence, however, must always remain in touch with other intelligences." "Comedy must be human, it must be aimed at the mind rather than the emotions, and it must be social."

IS HUMOR NEGATIVE?

- Plato, the most influential critic of laughter, treated laughter as an emotion that overrides rational self-control
- “laughter as malicious”
- “Taken generally,” he says, “the ridiculous is a certain kind of evil, specifically a vice.” That vice is self-ignorance: the people we laugh at imagine themselves to be wealthier, better looking, or more virtuous than they really are. In laughing at them, we take delight in something evil—their self-ignorance—and that malice is morally objectionable.
- Though Aristotle considered wit a valuable part of conversation, he agreed with Plato that laughter expresses scorn. “Wit”, he says in the Rhetoric “is educated insolence.”
- These objections to laughter and humor influenced early Christian thinkers, and through them later European culture
- The Rule of St. Benedict, the most influential monastic code, advised monks to “prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter.”

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

- Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), influential philosophers and theologians in the Western tradition
- Assessment of humor as virtuous
- Suggests that humor has social benefits
- “a eutrapelos, a pleasant person with a happy cast of mind who gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn.”
- Someone who is never playful or humorous, Aquinas says, is acting “against reason” and so is guilty of a vice.



Panel of an altarpiece from Ascoli Piceno, Italy, by Carlo Crivelli (15th century)

NEGATIVE HISTORY OF HUMOR

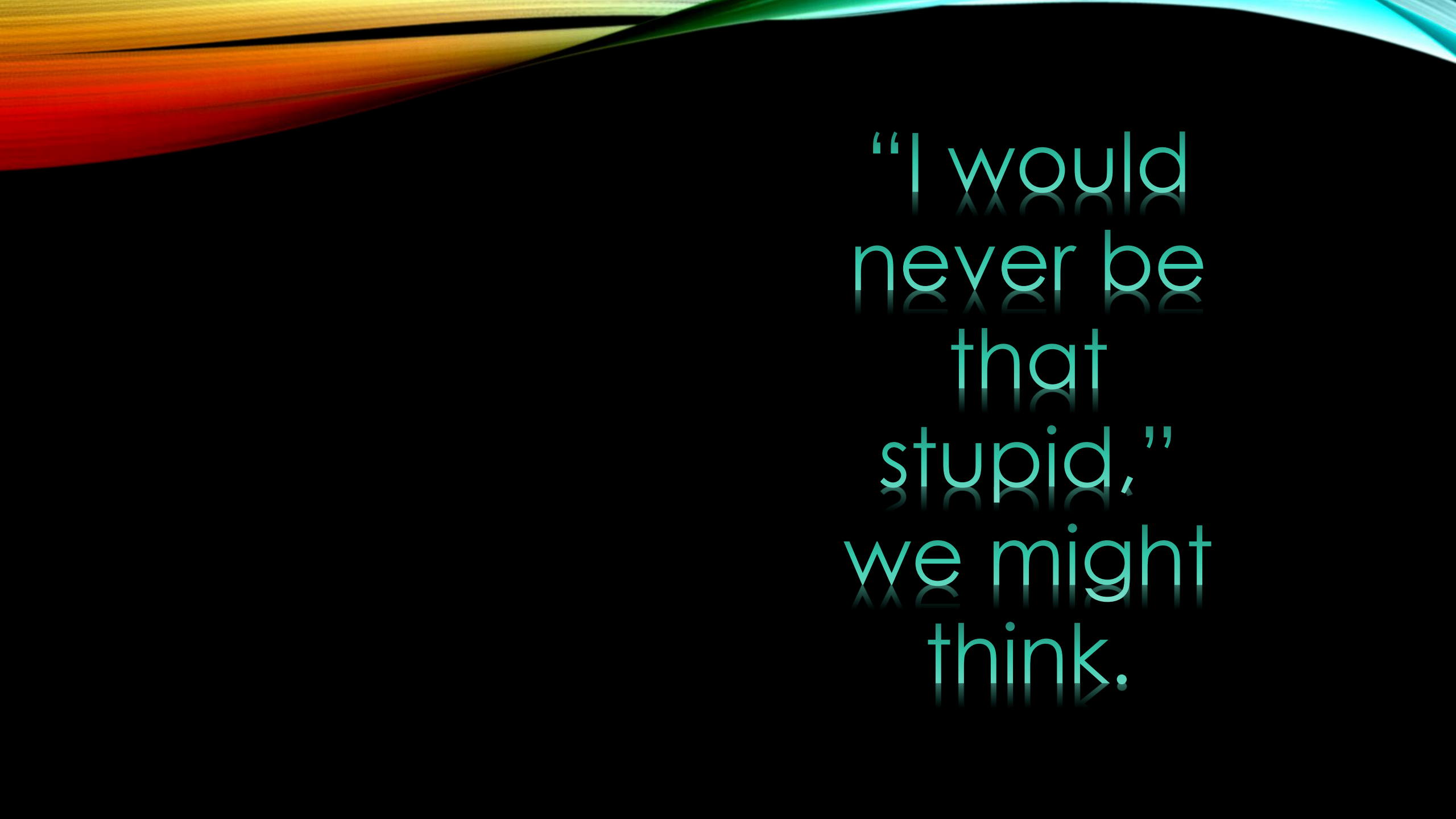
- Christian European rejection of laughter and humor continued through the Middle Ages, and whatever the Reformers reformed, it did not include the traditional assessment of humor
- When the Puritans came to rule England in the mid-17th century, they outlawed comedies. “a haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” H. L. Mencken
- Descartes’ Passions of the Soul: laughter only as an expression of scorn and ridicule.



<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/ch122-coming-to-america>

SUPERIORITY THEORY

- Psychological theory articulating the view of laughter that started in Plato and the Bible and dominated Western thinking about laughter for two millennia
 - developed by the ancient Greeks and remained the primary explanation of laughter until well into the 18th-century
 - laughter is a **type of social corrective**—a way that we regulate behaviors in society through ridicule
- 20th century, this idea was called the Superiority Theory: laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves.
 - Roger Scruton, who analyses amusement as an “attentive demolition” of a person or something connected with a person”
 - Charles Baudelaire: “laughter is satanic”—an expression of dominance over animals and a frustrated complaint against our being merely mortal.”



“I would
never be
that
stupid,”
we might
think.

CRITIQUES OF SUPERIORITY THEORY

- Francis Hutcheson (1750): “some ingenuity in dogs and monkeys, which comes near to some of our own arts, very often makes us merry; whereas their duller actions in which they are much below us, are no matter of jest at all.”; impact of pity of those with misfortune “we are in greater danger of weeping than laughing.” <https://philosophicalscraps.wordpress.com/2020/05/21/a-response-to-bergsons-laughter-pt-1/>
- Robert Solomon (2002) offers an *inferiority* theory of humor: source of humor based in inferiority or modesty; ability to laugh at ourselves (Three Stooges) <https://iep.utm.edu/humor/>
- A feeling of superiority is not a necessary condition of humor



EVOLUTIONARY THEORY



- **Evolutionary Roots in Primate Communication:** Some researchers suggest that laughter may have evolved from primate vocalizations, such as playful pant-grunts, which are used to signal relaxation and playfulness.

https://www.google.com/search?q=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&rlz=1C1SQJL_enUS809US809&oq=the+evolutionary+theory+of+laughter&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRigATIHCAIQIRigATIHCAMQIRifBdIBCjE5MjkzajBqMTWoAgiwAgHxBe2pViPe-JMo&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY



- Information being broadcast by the person laughing or its role in inducing positive affect in the listener, thereby facilitating interaction or reducing threat Anthropoid primates, social grooming is the principal mechanism (mediated by the central nervous system endorphin system) that underpins social bonding

<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2021.0176>

- Not enough time in our society to mimic the grooming rituals of apes
- As our ancestors began to live in larger and more complex social structures. The process of evolution would have favored the development of cognitive strategies that helped form and sustain these cooperative alliances.
- evolutionary 'False Alarm'

RELIEF/RELEASE THEORISTS

- Laughter does in the nervous system what a pressure-relief valve does in a steam boiler
Focuses on the motivations and the psychology behind our laughter
 - Lord Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor," the first publication in which *humor* used in the modern sense of funniness
 - Thought that nerves carried "animal spirits"—gases and liquids such as air and blood
 - *"The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned or controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint; and whether it be in burlesque, mimicry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves, and be revenged upon their constrainers."*
- Release of tension or excessive energy



IT'S ABOUT RELEASE OF ENERGY

SPENCER

- “The Physiology of Laughter” (1860)
- Excitement and mental agitation produces energy that “must expend itself in some way or another.”
- Everyday activities often related to work stress build tension (blow off steam)
- Nervous energy, he says, “always tends to beget muscular motion, and when it rises to a certain intensity, always does beget it” (anger and clenching fists before striking); laughter does not involve the motivation to do anything, just releases energy
- Critique: most “stressed out” seem the least receptive to humor; much laughter does not require a buildup

DEWEY

- John Dewey (1894) Laughter, he said, “marks the ending ... of a period of suspense, or expectation.”
- It is a “sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus... The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief.”

<https://www.psychologs.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/why-we-laugh-when-nervous-the-brains-unusual-coping-mechanism-for-stress.jpg>

SIGMUND FREUD

- Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905)
- 3 different sources of laughter—joking, the comic, and humor: all involve the saving of some psychic energy that is then discharged through laughter
- Repressed feelings regarding the rules of society: dirty jokes are especially funny
- Energy that would have been used to repress sexual and hostile feelings is saved and can be released in laughter
- Critique: does not furnish a way to distinguish humorous from non-humorous laughter; Relief Theory is seldom used as a general explanation of laughter or humor.

GALLOWS HUMOR

- Black comedy, black humor, bleak comedy, dark comedy, dark humor, gallows humor or morbid humor:
 - Style of comedy that makes light of subject matter that is generally considered taboo, particularly subjects that are normally considered serious or painful to discuss
 - Used by medical professionals, law enforcement
 - *Coping* humor vs *hoping* humor

HOW DO FAMILIES FEEL WHEN THEY HEAR NURSES LAUGHING IN THE ICU?



- Interviewed 25 family members
- Open ended questions:
 - Was your loved one's admission to the ICU expected (Open Heart Unit) or unexpected ?
 - Have you heard nurses laughing while visiting your loved one?
 - Was it in your loved one's room?
 - How did the laughter make you feel?
- ***"Gives me hope that everything is going to be OK as they wouldn't laugh if it was bad."***

IS GALLOWS HUMOR ETHICAL?

- Perceived very differently depending on whether you are inside or outside the profession
- No patient wants to be the butt of their physician's jokes
 - FAIRFAX, Va. (CN) - Doctors mocked an unconscious colonoscopy patient, joking that he has syphilis and talking about firing a gun up his rectum, says a man whose cellphone allegedly captured audio of the entire affair.
- “because it is about moral distress, power imbalances between doctors and patients, and good people making surprising choices.” Watson (2011) assistant professor in the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University
- As a bonding and coping mechanism among insiders
- Raunchiest and grossest humor: ED, OR, & ICU

Hardy C. Humor and sympathy in medical practice. *Med Health Care Philos.* 2020 Jun;23(2):179-190. doi: 10.1007/s11019-019-09928-0. PMID: 31637581; PMCID: PMC7259434.

Watson K. Gallows humor in medicine. *Hastings Cent Rep.* 2011 Sep-Oct;41(5):37-45. doi: 10.1002/j.1552-146x.2011.tb00139.x. PMID: 21980898.



Is this funny to you?
Why or why not?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- **Situation:** 3 ED residents tried unsuccessfully to save a teenage pizza delivery boy who had been shot while delivering their dinner. After finding the pizza box where the boy dropped it before running from his attackers, one of the residents made a joke: “How much you think we ought to tip him?” The residents laughed, and then ate the pizza. “Was it wrong to make a joke?” the doctor asked.
- Ethical question: “When is joking a form of abuse – of a patient, of trust, or of power?”
 - joke about a patient’s condition told in front of the patient or the patient’s family is unethical because it has the potential to harm them
 - the joke not harm anyone, she adds, it may have helped the residents “integrate this terrible event and get through the shift.”

HUMOR DURING WAR

- Often found on the most violent and hopeless battlefields. Those who have nearly everything taken from them have nothing left but to laugh
- “It was astonishing how loudly one laughed at tales of gruesome things, of war’s brutality — I, with the rest of them. I think at the bottom of it was a sense of the ironical contrast between the normal ways of civilian life, and this hark back to the caveman code.... It was the laughter of mortals at the trick which had been played on them by an ironical fate. They had been taught to believe that the whole object of life was to reach out to beauty and love...Now that ideal had broken like a china vase, dashed to hard ground. The contrast between that and this was devastating.” *British war correspondent Phillip Gibbs*

HOLOCAUST HUMOR

- **Self-humour**: One of the interviewees was telling about their hair being cut upon arrival to Auschwitz. Many women were crying, but she started laughing. When asked why, she answered that never in her life had she had a hairdo for free.
- **Black humor** was a means of reducing anxiety of the awareness of death. An example well-known in Warsaw: "Moishe, why are you using soap with so much fragrance?" - "When they turn me into soap, at least I will smell good".
- **Humor about food** constituted about 7 percent of humor discussed in the study. The interviewees mention that there was lots of humor about food there was always not enough of it. An interviewee recalls: there was a group which liked to discuss recipes. Suddenly one of them lost her mood and stopped talking. "What's wrong with her?" - "I think her cake has burned".

Chaya Ostrower, *Without Humor We Would Have Committed Suicide*:

INCONGRUITY/SURPRISE THEORY

- Perception of something incongruous—something that violates our mental patterns and expectations
- Focused not on what motivates laughter, but what actually causes it; logic and familiarity are replaced with things that normally don't come together
- James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and many later philosophers and psychologists.
- It is now the dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology.

WHAT THE PHILOSOPHERS SAID

- Create an expectation in the audience and then violate it
 - Stand up comedians: The set-up is the first part of the joke: it creates the expectation. The punch (line) is the last part that violates that expectation
 - Joke's ending is incongruous with the beginning
- Kant (1790): joke amuses us by evoking, shifting, and dissipating our thoughts, but we do not learn anything through these mental gymnastics; jostling of ideas = produces a physical jostling of our internal organs and we enjoy that physical stimulation; pleasure in laughter is only physical and not intellectual
- Schopenhauer (1818): humor arises when we suddenly notice the incongruity between a concept and a perception that are supposed to be of the same thing
- Kierkegaard (1846): discrepancy between abstract ideas and real things
- Thomas Schultz (1976) and Jerry Suls (1972) have claimed that what we enjoy in humor is not incongruity itself, but the resolution of incongruity. Mae West said, "Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution,"

CRITIQUE OF THE THEORY: OWEN & MZEE

- That the perception of incongruity is sufficient for humor:
FALSE
 - when our mental patterns and expectations are violated, we may well feel fear, disgust, or anger and not amusement at all
- Humorous amusement is not just any response to incongruity, but a way of enjoying incongruity
- Michael Clark (1987): 3 features as necessary and sufficient for humor:
 1. A person perceives (thinks, imagines) an object as being incongruous.
 2. The person enjoys perceiving (thinking, imagining) the object.
 3. The person enjoys the perceived (thought, imagined) incongruity at least partly for itself, rather than solely for some ulterior reason



WHAT FUNCTION DOES HUMOR SERVE IN HUMAN LIFE?

- Similarities between play and humor suggest that the adaptive value of play might be like that of humor
- Play theory tries to give humor a genus by offering some differentiating characteristics, essential to humor
- Classify humor as a species of play

PLAY THEORIES

- Max Eastman: *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (1936)
 - Humor as an extension of animal play
 - Call our attention to the structural similarities between play contexts and humorous context
 - The wagging tail of a happy dog is a form of humorous laughter; broaden the definition of laughter to encompass other rhythmic responses to pleasure
 - What is central to humor and play is that both require taking a disinterested attitude towards what might otherwise be seen as serious

“we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully”

LAUGHTER AS A PLAY SIGNAL



- Certain kinds of humor involve mock aggression and insults, and because some forms of play activities result in humorous amusement.
- In animals, learn skills necessary for the future
- For children and young animals, the play activities that seem the most fun are those in which we exercise our abilities in unusual and extreme ways, yet in a safe setting (sports)
- The signal in adults

LAUGHTER AS A PLAY SIGNAL

- When in conversation we switch from serious discussion to making funny comments, for example, we keep the same vocabulary and grammar, and our sentences transcribed to paper might look like bona-fide assertions, questions, etc. This similarity between non-serious and serious language and actions calls for ways that participants can distinguish between the two. Ethologists call these ways “play signals.”
- The oldest play signals in humans are smiling and laughing. speculate that the first play signals in humans evolved from two facial displays in an ancestor of both humans and the great apes that are still found in gorillas and chimps. One was the “grin face” or “social grimace
- “silent bared-teeth display,” according to van Hooff (1972), evolved into the human social smile of appeasement, as when a child is caught with their hand in the cookie jar.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LAUGHTER AND PLAY

- Johan Huizinga Homo Ludens (1938), criticizes identifying play with laughter or the comic
 - Laughter, he argues, is particular to humans, whereas, play is found in other mammals and birds
 - Questions whether humor and play share any necessary conditions, a requirement of the relationship if humor is a subtype of play

BENIGN VIOLATION

- 2010 in the journal *Psychological Science*, A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (University of Colorado Boulder), proposed a theory they call “benign violation” Derives from the theory of incongruity, but it goes deeper
- Humor results when a person simultaneously recognizes both that an ethical, social or physical norm has been violated, and that this violation is not very offensive, reprehensible or upsetting.
- Hence, someone who judges a violation as no big deal will be amused, whereas someone who finds it scandalous, disgusting or simply uninteresting will not

BENIGN VIOLATION

- Levity can also partly be a product of distance from a situation (geographical or emotional remoteness); viewing a situation as imaginary
- McGraw argues that there seems to be an optimal comic point where the balance is just right between how bad a thing is and how distant it is.
- Does not address the role humor has played in humanity's evolutionary success



An Important Statistic

The published statistics on prostate cancer show that single men are diagnosed much less frequently than married men. On the other hand, married men diagnosed with prostate cancer live longer than single men with the disease. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that men should stay single, but should get married if diagnosed with prostate cancer.

QUESTIONS REMAIN

- Some confusion about the relation between humor and laughter
 - “Laughter is a more social phenomenon, and it occurs for reasons other than humor, including unpleasant ones. Moreover, humor does not always make us laugh.” Giovannantonio Forabosco, a psychologist and an editor at an Italian journal devoted to studies of humor (Rivista Italiana di Studi sull’Umore, or RISU)
- How can the sometimes opposite functions of humor, such as promoting social bonding and excluding others with derision, be reconciled?
- “What is humor? Maybe in 40 years we’ll know,” Forabosco says. And perhaps in 40 years we’ll be able to explain why he laughs as he says it.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/whats-so-funny-the-science-of-why-we-laugh/>

